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Sidhva, Dina ; Palattiyil, George; Pawar, Manohar; Shajahan, PK; Cox, James; Anand, Janet

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# **Reclaiming International Social Work in the Context of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: Some Critical Reflections**

**Abstract:** The protection of human rights and promotion of social justice is a shared spirit manifested within all social work. Islands of local concern are directly affected by global stresses and inequalities and the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development has created a space for repositioning social work globally in addressing these challenges. This article opens up definitions and examples of international social work, arguing the need for integrating an international outlook within social work education and policy in order that the emerging workforce, wherever they may be, are equipped with the knowledge, skills and values for international action.

**Key words:** International social work, global agenda, social justice, human rights, global challenges, social work education

## **Authors:**

1. George Palattiyil, Social Work, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom.
2. Dina Sidhva, Social Work, School of Media, Culture and Society, University of the West of Scotland, Paisley, United Kingdom.
3. Manohar Pawar, Social Work, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Charles Stuart University, Wagga Wagga, Australia.
4. Shajahan PK, Centre for Community Organisation and Development Practice, School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India.
5. James Cox, Independent Social Worker and Practice Educator, Edinburgh, United Kingdom.
6. Janet Carter Anand, Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio, Finland,

## **Corresponding Author's contact details:**

Dr George Palattiyil, Social Work, School of Social and Political Science, The University of Edinburgh, 15A George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LD, Telephone: ++ 44 131 6503907, Email: [g.palattiyil@ed.ac.uk](mailto:g.palattiyil@ed.ac.uk)

# **Reclaiming International Social Work in the Context of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: Some Critical Reflections**

## **Introduction**

The recent years have seen a rise in the international profile of social work. The development of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (Jones and Truell, 2012; IFSW, IASSW, ICSW, 2012) and the United Nations celebrating the World Social Work Day are examples of this. Given social work's contribution to equality, social justice and development and the role of social work in the context of poverty alleviation, globalisation, migration, human rights and climate change (see: Dominelli, 2011; Healy and Link, 2011; Staub-Bernasconi, 2011; Williams and Graham, 2014), the time seems right to consider the part that social work should and could play in promoting globally sustainable approaches to the many issues facing human development.

While social work practice is always contextually situated, increasingly there is a drive towards internationalising the profession with many examples of exchanges of expertise that cross-cut national boundaries (Adams, Dominelli and Payne, 2005; Noble, Strauss and Littlechild, 2014; Cleak, Anand, and Das, 2016). Much of this arises from political, social and economic crises such as the rise of transnational migration of people. Therefore it is helpful to begin with a reflection on how social work has changed and continues to evolve to meet the local as well as global demands.

## **Social work: its global reach and local impact**

Over the years, social work has been defined and re-defined to reflect its global reach and local impact, and several authors have written on the emerging field of international social

work (see: Lyons, 1999; Midgley, 2001; Healy, 2008a; Dominelli, 2010; Gray and Web, 2010; Cox and Pawar, 2013). While across the world, social work is concerned with eradicating poverty and inequality and promoting social justice and human rights; there is a diversity of context-dependent ways in which social work profession approaches these issues (Palattiyil, Sidhva and Chakrabarti, 2015). Thus, there is no easy way of defining what social workers do across the world, in a simple, single sentence. Nevertheless there is a shared understanding of social work's aspiration to promote social justice and human rights for all human beings. The global definition of social work profession adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IFSW & IASSW, 2014) states that "social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing". It is evident that social work, while increasingly internationalised, is a context-dependent in practice (Nikku and Pulla, 2014). Today, this context is often both local and global.

Social workers operate at the point where social forces and individual behaviour meet (IFSW/IASSW, 2000). Nonetheless, the contexts in which contemporary social work operates are multi-faceted and cover the global, the regional, the national and the local (Dominelli, 2010, p.26). In most of the Western Nation States, social work assumes a statutory welfare role with legal powers for assessment and intervention in situations of need, while in developing countries of the Global South, social work is concerned more with the structural issues of poverty, exclusion, lack of education and under-development and is more linked to humanitarianism, activism and empowerment. For example, social work in the UK

is more formalised and has a statutory status with the title of social work given protection in law. Social work education is underpinned by standards laid down by the regulatory bodies and social workers have powers to intervene in times of crisis where the welfare of a service user (child neglect or abuse of older people, for example) is at risk. Social work's primary role in most of the European countries is to intervene early, minimise risks and promote welfare; thus social work has come to be recognised as an important public service and can be said to be an element within the European social model (Jones, 2013; Lorenz, 1994).

On the other hand, in most of the developing countries of the Global South, social work operates to effect structural changes through social and political action. Social workers in such contexts have been working to eradicate poverty and promote health and education; this practice has gained further impetus with the launch of the Millennium Development Goals by the United Nations (2000). The 'Sustainable Development Goals' adopted by the UN in 2015 has further accentuated the important role social work plays in addressing some of the global challenges (Jayasooria, 2016; IFSW, 2017a). Participation, self-reliance, sustainability, and empowerment are the key principles often applied by social workers in the design and delivery of such programmes (IFSW, 2012a) which seek to involve other stakeholders including civil society and community organizations. The formal training and practice of social workers is also less regulated in the Global South. For example, the First Report of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (IASSW, ICSW and IFSW, 2014) indicates that social work is an established, but mostly unregulated profession across the African continent, although some national governments are discussing formal regulations of qualifications and title, (for example, as implemented in South Africa, Osei-Hwedie, 2013). In the Asian region, especially in China and India, there has been a rapid growth in the number of schools of social work, and India continues to produce a large number of social workers that operate at the grassroots level (Tan, 2013). For example in India, globalisation

and its overwhelming impact on India's masses, have led to a more radical and activist type of social work intervention with mass movements. This has, for example, included mass agitation in support of the poor, displaced by multi-national hydro-electric projects; support for the victims of industrial accidents (such as the Bhopal Gas tragedy – see: [www.bhopal.com](http://www.bhopal.com); Broughton, 2005); and advocacy movements promoting the equality of Dalits (Palattiyil and Sidhva, 2012). In these situations, it is fair to say that social work is not of the kind practised in Anglophone countries, especially that delivered by statutory services that are confined to the narrow realms of statutory interventions mandated by the State. By contrast, social work in the Global South strives to effect social and economic changes by radical actions aimed at social and community development. Some of the Schools of Social Work in India, for example, have social action projects to advocate for and improve the conditions of unorganised construction workers; marginalised fishing communities; trafficked women and children, informal education for street children; and people living with HIV (Alphonse, George and Moffat, 2008; Kuruvilla, 2004). Interestingly, one of the most life-changing spheres in which social workers operate is managing the after-effects of natural disasters (for example, tsunami or earthquake) and supporting efforts at rehabilitation (Tan, Rowlands and Yuen, 2007; Authors' own, 2012; Blyth and Ting, 2015; Kruck and Aghabakshi, 2015). What is noteworthy is the fact that while risk and vulnerability of marginalised people are the driving force behind social work interventions, many of the interventions that take place are without the statutory powers as understood in the Western social work context (Authors' own, 2012).

Globally, the practice of social work has been greatly influenced by the challenges of underdevelopment, lack of human rights and the more detrimental effects of globalisation

(Kendall, 2008; Healy, 2008a; Dominelli 2010); this is particularly evident in some of the social work narratives emerging from the countries in the Global South. Social work has been responding to global social problems (Lalayants, Doel and Kachkachishvili, 2014) such as street children, human trafficking, disaster relief and humanitarian aid, food shortages, climate change, existing and emerging pandemics, forced migration and refugee crises. This necessitates systemic and practice response strategies in which the social work role is central. As Kendall (2008) notes, the social problems and conditions arising out of globalisation create significant areas of international responsibility and demands for expanded knowledge and understanding for the social work profession. Social Work has seen the deleterious effects of globalisation (Caragata and Sanchez, 2002; Dominelli, 2010) and its impacts on social issues require social workers to be responsive and knowledgeable in addressing them (Lalayants et al, 2014).

### **Social work – a global profession**

Viewed globally, the majority of social workers are increasingly engaged in transnational challenges that hinder human development and well-being. Now, trained social workers occupy several positions in many of the international development, humanitarian aid and human rights organisations and the significance of social work as a global profession has gained increased recognition from several global bodies including the United Nations. The UN Under-Secretary General for Economic and Social Affairs gave the keynote address to the World Conference on Social Work and Social Development 2010 that reflected the UN's appreciation of social work's global reach. He emphasised the unique role of social workers in implementing global social policy at the grassroots, recognising the need for social work

with the poor, the voiceless, and the disenfranchised in the eradication of poverty and inequality and promotion of human rights (cited in Jones and Truell, 2012).

Helen Clark (Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme), while accepting the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development on behalf of the UN reflected that: “Across the United Nations, our organisations work to eradicate poverty, promote human rights, and advance sustainable development. The Global Agenda’s vision mirrors many of the goals, rights, and agreements established by the United Nations – and the mandates of our agencies, funds, and programmes. We too are pledged to address the root causes of poverty, oppression, and inequality. We support the call in the Global Agenda “to create a more socially-just and fair world which we will be proud to leave to future generations”. She went on to highlight the significant role social workers play globally in promoting human rights and social justice; and said: “For more than a century, the social work profession has been at the forefront of promoting human rights and supporting people to realize their full potential. Various arms of the United Nations have worked with your organisations in global fora, and alongside social workers in-country to advance progress on the Millennium Development Goals, engage citizens in development, and strengthen social protection systems” (2012) and anticipated enhanced partnerships between social workers and the United Nations in the years to come.

As already noted, the importance of social work as a global profession gained much leverage with the establishment of the Social Work Day at the United Nations, and IFSW celebrating the World Social Work Day across the world as part of a global campaign to reposition the social work profession. Crucial to this celebration is the importance given to each of the Global Agenda theme since its adoption by the UN in 2012. This growth and development of social work as a global profession owes much to the pioneering work of the three global



bodies representing social work—The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and The International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), whose vision, commitment and joint efforts culminated in developing the Global Agenda. These developments suggest a need to begin a conversation about what exactly might be meant by international social work practice.

### **Defining International Social Work – diverging perspectives**

The recent years have seen an increased emphasis on the internationalisation of social work profession (Caragata and Sanchez, 2002; Johnson, 2004; Heron, 2005; Lalayants et al, 2014) and a number of authors have attempted to define what international social work entails. Over the years, these definitions have evolved from a narrow perspective to embrace broader aspects of international social work, such as working with asylum seekers and refugees; and engaging in disaster relief efforts. For example, the US Council on Social Work Education in 1956 argued that “the term ‘international social work’ should be confined to social work of international scope, such as those carried on by intergovernmental agencies, chiefly those of the U.N.; governmental or non-governmental agencies with international programmes” (Stein, 1957; cited in Healy, 2008a). Much later, Sanders and Pederson (1984) proposed that “international social work means those social work activities and concerns that transcend national and cultural boundaries” (p. xiv). Increasingly however, there has been a greater emphasis on including social justice and human rights as a guiding principle for international social work. For example, Haug (2005) stated that “international social work includes any social work activity anywhere in the world, directed toward global social justice and human rights, in which local practice is dialectically linked to the global context” (p.133). In her book on international social work, Healy (2008a) defined international social work as

“international professional action and the capacity for international action by the social work profession and its members. International action has four dimensions: internationally related domestic practice and advocacy, professional exchange, international practice, and international policy development and advocacy” (p.10).

In what is perhaps the most recent definition, authors’ own (2013) incorporates certain core themes and defines international social work as the “promotion of social work education and practice globally and locally, with the purpose of building a truly integrated international profession that reflects social work’s capacity to respond appropriately and effectively, in education and practice terms, to the various global challenges that are having a significant impact on the well-being of large sections of the world’s population. This global and local promotion of social work education and practice is based on an integrated-perspectives approach that synthesises global, human rights, ecological, and social development perspectives of international situations and responses to them” (p.29-30). In other words, international social work aims to advance the causes of the vulnerable and marginalised with the aim of promoting social justice, equality, and human rights in a global context. It further acknowledges that inequality, injustice and under-development which are core concerns of social work in most parts of the world are, though locally manifested, the roots of it are to do more with global processes in an interconnected world we live today.

This broader definition helpfully encapsulates certain features that highlight the importance of local knowledge and practice over the ever-present danger of the West imposing on other countries its basic understanding of the nature and roles of social work (Authors’ own, 2013).

These include:

- Action to address social work education and practice at global and local levels;
- Links between education and international practice;

- Integration of diverse practices rather than dominated by one country or culture;
- An integrated-perspectives approach to practice—that is, a synthesis of global, human right, ecological, and social development perspectives;
- Individual and collective well-being (p.30)

Thus, international social work entails social work intervention at many levels, from local to global, engaging to effect both social and structural changes with the aim of promoting human and social development, social justice and human rights. As Cox and Pawar (2006) emphasise, international social work should adopt an integrated perspective, drawing together issues of globalization with human rights, ecological and social development perspectives. Such an approach will help extend knowledge and skills required for operating at both local and global levels and promote effective services in the fields of international social development, social welfare and human services. In a globalised social environment, local social workers, wherever they are located, increasingly find that ‘local practice is international’ and international developments impact on local practice: ‘international is local’ (Jones, 2011, personal communication).

### **The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development**

The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development is a set of goals designed by IFSW, IASSW and ICSW to strengthen the profile of social work and to enable social workers to make a stronger contribution to policy development (Jones and Truell, 2012: 454). It is the product of a three-year collaborative process by the above social work bodies working together with the United Nations to address the crucial problems perpetuating poverty, inequality and unsustainable human environments (Nikku and Pulla, 2014: 373).

The Global Agenda has been developed against the backdrop of increasing globalisation (Dominelli, 2010) and new global challenges in human conditions that propel us into a search for new global responses (Jones and Truell, 2012). Jones and Truell (2012) argue that the worldwide recession, heightened inequality, extensive migratory movements, increased pandemics and natural catastrophes, and new forms of conflict, require us, as social work and social development professionals and educators, to be more aware of global realities and to act differently (p. 455). Widening social and economic inequality within most countries and across the world is now well-documented (UNDP, 2013) and there is an array of international reports and research studies all pointing in the same direction (e.g. Milanovic, 2005 & 2011; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Stiglitz, 2012). There is growing global consensus on the need to bridge the divide between the haves and the have-nots' (Hongbo, 2013; UNDESA, 2013) and the Global Agenda has been developed as a shared commitment to address the worldwide dynamics that perpetuate poverty, inequality of opportunities and access to resources, and oppression, and to give greater prominence to the key contributions of social work and social development (IFSW, IASSW, ICSW, 2014: 3). It is a major element in a decade-long commitment to focus worldwide attention on four themes of ([www.globalsocialagenda.org](http://www.globalsocialagenda.org)):

- Promoting social and economic equalities,
- Promoting the dignity and worth of peoples,
- Working towards environmental and community sustainability,
- Strengthening recognition of the importance of human relationships.

### **A time to reposition social work**

We are living in a period of globalisation (Alphonse, George and Moffat, 2008; Kuruvilla, 2004) that is impacting almost every country in the world. The social work profession

worldwide has been increasingly influenced by globalisation (Midgley, 2001; Lalayants et. al, 2014) and it has begun to recognise the impact of globalisation on almost every problem that social work practitioners deal with (Kendall, 2008). Social workers are frequently called upon to deal with global social problems like asylum seekers and refugees, (Palattiyil and Sidhva, 2011), street children, alcohol and substance abuse, HIV and AIDS, human trafficking, cross-border adoption and so on. The field of international social work holds significant potential in this context as a response to globalisation (Caragata and Sanchez, 2002; Cox, 2000). Social workers use diverse approaches, ranging from culturally sensitive and cross-cultural practices to advocacy and campaigns to work with asylum seekers and refugees and in diverse contexts such as aid/humanitarian settings, social development and human rights organisations. These diverse approaches across different cultural settings have now been broadly labelled as ‘international social work’ (Dominelli, 2005; Midgley, 2001; Healy, 2008a; Authors’ own, 2013)

The recent past has seen a considerable increase in the coverage of international social work in the wider literature (Midgley, 2001; Caragata and Sanchez, 2002; Healy, 2008a; Mohan, 2008; Razack, 2009; Authors’ own, 2013). The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, (IFSW, 2012b), along with the global demand for social workers, international placements for qualifying social work students, social workers without borders, role of social workers in humanitarian and aid agencies and so on have further contributed to this debate.

While globalisation has led to increased economic independence for many, it has also exacerbated the rich-poor divide and inequalities and other social problems experienced by large sections of the population. The world is witnessing complex emergencies, creating major global challenges. The question is whether social work practitioners are adequately

trained to understand the global forces driving these problems or are in a stronger position to respond to them effectively (Lalayants et. al, 2014). More precisely, how can contemporary social work respond to these complex and emerging challenge? How can social work educators prepare a workforce fit to respond to the Global Agenda (IFSW, 2012b)? How can we find commonalities and shared commitments from across the more established Western models of social work and more humanitarian and development oriented social work as practised in much of the developing countries of the Global South? Authors' own (2013), examine these challenges in their book 'International Social Work: Issues, Strategies and Problems' and argue for a radical rethink of social work education and practice (see Authors' own, 2013 for their detailed critique).

As social work globally moves towards realising the Global Agenda, there are a number of challenges that need to be addressed in ensuring a shared commitment and common platform for promoting social justice, equality and human rights. Some of these challenges are briefly summarised as below:

- Social work and social development: Social work education needs to reflect on the wider social and structural issues of poverty, inequality and the impact of conflict on forced migration and enable social work practitioners to develop knowledge and skills to work in global social work and social development settings responding to complex emergencies. This might call for developing short 'Go Abroad' visits for social work students or overseas work-based placements that afford social work students a first-hand experience of working with the 'real world issues of social work'
- Standards of social work education: While the regulatory frameworks that inform social work in much of the Western social work contexts is formal and attuned to local needs, a deeper understanding of global issues and challenges would enable

students to gain a wider perspective. Similarly, there is an imperative on social work education and training in developing countries to drive up the standards by strengthening the field learning in a global context rather than being defined by the local.

- International social work as a core element of social work curriculum: While the concept of international social work has gained momentum in the recent past, particularly in some parts of the world, a commitment to incorporating international social work into the teaching curriculum would enable students to be better prepared for dealing with global challenges and cross-cultural issues in practice. Increasingly, there is a growing interest in international placements for social work students as part of degree programmes; a step in the right direction. The success of creating a workforce that is equipped to deal with the global challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century depends on acquiring the skills and knowledge to respond to them effectively; the more international exchanges and work experience a practitioner has, the better.
- Social work as a human rights discipline: Central to social work is a commitment to respond to poverty, inequality and to promote social justice; and a commitment to empower marginalised individuals and communities. If this is the core identity of social work, then there is a need to understand social work as an important social justice effort and human rights as a core principle underlying social work education. While organisations like IFSW are striving to position social work as human rights profession (IFSW, 2017b; Healy, 2008b), a brief online review of social work curriculum across a number of universities points to a greater need to incorporate human rights as an essential part of social work education.
- Collective action and social movements: There is a risk that social work and social work education in the West have up until recently not given global challenges, such as

climate change, disaster management, forced displacement, migration etc. the importance in their practice and curriculum that it should be accorded. Collective action and social movements are pivotal to challenging institutions and multi-national corporations to understand the impact of these challenges on the global poor in such a way that action can be taken to address these issues.

- The Global Agenda: While the three international bodies representing social work and social welfare (viz. IFSW, IASSW & ICSW) reached a commitment to promoting the core themes identified in the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, the success depends on the extent to which these aspirations are embedded in social work curriculum and practice—locally and globally.

## **Conclusion**

Social work in much of the Western world has the benefit of formally recognised standards, regulatory powers and protected title. However the field of social work in developing countries and particularly in the least developed countries of the world is being diluted by other allied professions. Conversations with academics and practitioners in such contexts point to an emerging paradigm where new applied courses such as international development, human rights, development studies, social policy and law and community management programmes are edging social work practitioners on to the margins. The number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is on the rise, but they operate with shrinking funds and their survival is uncertain. This can be challenging not only for the people for whom social work exists to serve, but also for those who are qualifying as social workers with lesser job opportunities (Authors' own, 2012). Interestingly, many of the International Development and comparable degrees offered in the West equip their students for work in NGOs in



developing countries (for example, through on-course work-based placements); while what these NGOs are engaged in doing is social work or more precisely international social work.

Across the world, social work has been concerned with the impact of poverty and inequality on human development, and with promoting human rights and social justice. Professional social workers are on the frontline addressing some of today's most pressing international issues; and social work is becoming a more global profession rather than one being dominated by its Western roots (see: Lyons, Hokenstadt, Pawar, Huegler and Hall, 2012; Lyons, Manion and Carlsen 2006; Weiss and Welbourne, 2007). Globally, many social work schools have begun to internationalise their curriculum (Lalayants et al, 2014) and literature points to a growing interest in international exchange programmes for social work students. Such opportunities allow students to 'search for subjugated knowledge' by listening to the voices of the marginalised individuals, which prevents them from engaging in what Abram and Cruce (2007) call 'professional imperialism' (p. 14). Interpreted more broadly, there is limited appreciation of colonial history in the contemporary social work literature, allowing a deeper exploration of the roots of racism and marginalisation of the poor.

A cursory online review of 20 social work course syllabi from across the West and the Global South provided a somewhat disappointing reading. While the Global Agenda themes were reflected in these programmes albeit indirectly, little explicit reference was made to the realisation of the Global Agenda or indeed how these themes were incorporated into their teaching. Despite this far-reaching policy aspiration as enunciated above, the challenge for achieving the Global Agenda outcomes depends on how a social work workforce can be developed and nurtured, equipped with the skills and expertise in implementing these ambitious goals. This perhaps goes back to the question of how far we are prepared to include international social work in the social work curriculum. While international social work has

begun to feature in some of the social work curricula globally, authors like Healy (1995) believe that schools of social work are not adequately exposing students to international content. Nagy and Falk (2000) further aver that the world's social work educational institutions do not appear to have moved steadily in the direction of incorporating a new vision of social work in the global context (p. 51). Rather there is an overemphasis on the contextual aspects of social work (Nikku and Pulla, 2014) underpinned by local standards and regulations. Moreover, one of the key challenges facing social work in most of the Anglophone countries is the ever-increasing influence of 'local drivers' in informing social work policy and practice, with little explicit space for global issues. This leads one to perhaps wonder whether regulation and standards of education promote a profession that takes its international obligations seriously as a 'culture carrier' or does it bring social work within the control and power of governments unable to impact on these agenda. This, for example, is evident in terms of UNCRC where the obligations of international standards on local policy and practice are major, yet social work in such contexts (for example Scotland or the wider United Kingdom) is not really involved. This is perhaps rooted in how the profession organises itself and is regulated – here in the United Kingdom by government quango rather than in partnership with the members of the profession.

Nonetheless, the achievement of these shared global commitments depends on translating the four pillars of the Global Agenda. This will require a shared commitment between individual social work educators, schools of social work, global and regional organizations and policy-makers (Nikku and Pulla, 2014, p. 383). A process of collective global engagement is needed in order to make the Agenda a genuine, democratic and determined endeavour and in order to provide a focus for social work; to reassert the specific contribution of social work knowledge and skills to a world in social crisis; and to encourage self-confidence among social work practitioners, educators and policy-makers. (Jones and Truell, 2012, p. 465).

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